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October 2012



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## GATHERED TO LEARN

VOLUME 25 NUMBER 8 OCTOBER 2012

Crowds gathered around Jesus to learn from his parables. We too gather around him to listen and learn.

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## VOICES

# Listening and Learning

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

In this season, we often remember what it was like to be in school, living according to the rhythm of the academic year. I don't know about you, but I loved it. I loved the season itself with its grey skies and bright leaves. I loved the new notepaper and pens. And I am blessed with memories of many fine teachers.

In this issue's Bible study session, Audrey West writes that "The first thing that Jesus does in Mark's gospel after calling disciples is to go to the synagogue, where he teaches with such authority that it astounds the people who are gathered there" (Mark 1:21-22). She says that Jesus is a really good teacher: "Wherever Jesus teaches, people are astonished at his authority and surprised by his wisdom. They flock to him in order to hear him."

Have you ever had a really good teacher? Someone who challenged you and nurtured you and encouraged you to do your best?

In "Remembering a Good Teacher," Robert Wyatt recalls a college professor who taught his students a lot about life: "Charles Harrison would be regarded as a relic in many of today's universities. He thought that good literature taught good values. Most of all, he believed that works of the imagination taught us all how to live a good life."

Robert tells us that part of what made his professor such a beloved teacher was that he listened to students and took them seriously. Sonia Solomonson takes on the subject of holy listening in "Listening Is Love." She reminds us that

"... the words *silent* and *listen* have the same letters. To really hear what someone is saying, to really listen, we have to be silent. We need to silence both external and internal voices."

Something we struggle with, though, is knowing who to listen to. When there are so many voices, so many messages, coming at us from all directions—the media, the Internet, our friends and family—how do we evaluate what we hear? Who is teaching and proclaiming in a way that merits our attention?

In "Absolute Truth?" Gwen Saylor helps us think about that question. She cautions us against making this messy world into issues of black and white: "Realizing that no one on this side of heaven possesses absolute truth, what counts is that we make our less-than-perfect decisions as responsibly as we can. We are called to be faithful, not right."

Finally, I want to encourage you to remember St. Luke this month. Carol LaHurd opens her article about the apostle with this description: "When the Christian world celebrates the feast day of St. Luke on October 18, he will be praised as evangelist, beloved physician, artist, and the gospel writer who mostly fully portrays Mary, the mother of Jesus. Some of what we know about Luke comes from church tradition. One trait we can know from the Bible itself is that Luke was an exceptional storyteller." She goes on to tell us that we can learn to tell our own faith stories by learning from Luke and listening to Jesus. 🌿

Kate Sprutta Elliott is editor of *Gather*.





GIVE US THIS DAY

## Words From Herself

by Fran Ansley

### Near the end of Mama's

life, communication with her became different. She no longer knew our names or exactly who we were. Don't get me wrong. She continued to recognize us from the heart. Whether or not Mama knew our names, she always seemed to know that we were *hers*.

Most of the time, she retained her ability to follow the emotional current of a conversation. She knew when you were telling her something you thought was funny, and she would laugh. She knew when you were telling her about something exciting, and she would say something encouraging. There was a great deal of emotional intelligence flowing through her right up to the end.

Still, in terms of words themselves, she gradually grew more and more limited—or maybe *distilled* is better. Mama had particular phrases she would dwell on. One of the therapists called these repetitions “comfort phrases.”

She would say, “Oh God, it's so dangerous—all the way home.” The mention of *home* was comforting, but it was unsettling to hear those references to danger. I would have preferred not to be reminded of the hard road she was walking through the ravages of Alzheimer's disease.

Toward the end of her life, Mama was seldom able to carry on much back-and-forth dialogue. Many times our visits became more focused on pleasures that had no talking, like holding hands, looking at clouds, brushing hair. And so, I really appreciated what happened a few days before I was to leave on a trip and

three weeks before she died. Visiting her at assisted living, I asked if she would like to sing a little.

Instead of answering my question, Mama began to talk. And I mean *talk*. Full-blown sentences that seemed to be directed toward those here today and dear family and friends who had gone before her into the presence of God.

There seemed to be a kind of urgency about it, so I grabbed a spiral notebook we kept in her room, and began to take notes. “Oh good,” she said, “You write all this down.” Highlights follow.

**MAMA:** Something about today, it's just magic. That's what it is, magic. We are going on a trip, and we have a nice easy drive. Do you all want to come and spend the night?

**ME:** Of course.

**MAMA:** Oh, good. And we'll be tired, so we'll just be lazy! And we'll just be ourselves. You know, I love this group of people. I love them, every time I am with them. And I am always going to be with them. All the way home.

**ME:** Let's have a party.

**MAMA:** Yes! That suits me *exactly*! Let's invite every single one. And when we run into each person, it's like a little joy.

**ME:** And it will be us forever and ever, amen.

**MAMA:** Oh, I'm so glad you said that. It's the best thing.

**ME:** Mama, I have to go home now.

**MAMA:** Yes of course you do. You go now. (*Closing her eyes*) To go to sleep, to go to sleep, to go to sleep . . . 🌸

Fran Ansley is a retired law professor and non-retired social activist who lives in Knoxville, Tenn.





# ALWAYS REFORMING

by Patricia Lull

In my second call, I served a congregation that had begun as a mission start three decades earlier. As the congregation grew in numbers we recognized a need for a different space to better house our vibrant worship life and the community's use of our building. It wasn't a realization that dawned on us overnight. It was a recognition that took root over time.



Wise leaders recognized that the decisions we faced weren't just about architecture and building materials. If we were to expand our existing space, we needed to insure that the choices and investments we made would align with the mission to which God had called us in that setting.

Did we really need more space? Could we worship well just by adding a third service and monitoring how many outside groups had access to our space? Would the time and money involved in a capital project be better spent on other deep commitments within the congregation, particularly on issues of hunger and justice?

The church building was located adjacent to a major university in a neighborhood that was now almost entirely student rentals and apartments. While that site served well for our intentional focus on campus ministry, parking was limited and there was little land for a play area for the growing number of children in the parish. If we were to build a new building, would we be wiser to relocate to a neighborhood where we could afford a parking lot and an outside play area?

Because the decisions we faced had consequences for the congregation and the surrounding community, we took our time discerning the right way forward. There were forums and retreats, brainstorming sessions and plenty of informal conversations. We consulted with other congregations that were similar in size and focus. There were differing viewpoints throughout the discernment process, but one thing we all knew was that the congregation would be changed by the decisions we made.

Eventually we did decide to expand and to do so by tearing down a portion of the existing structure and rebuilding on the same site. All through the planning and fund-raising process, the congregation continued to think about what mattered most in its worship and in service to the community. We carried those commitments with us during the year we moved into a

temporary rented space while the new church building was under construction. There, in a former school cafeteria, we learned just how portable our commitments to word and sacrament were. We discovered that we didn't need to have a building of our own to worship God, serve our neighbors, or reach out to nearby university students.

Even if a temporary relocation and major building project had not loomed before us, we would have been responding to change. All congregations face a continual cascade of choices and opportunities as the communities in which they are located evolve and present new opportunities for ministry.

Think of the major decisions that churches have faced in your own lifetime. In mine, those have included patterns for worship and three new hymnals, ongoing mergers and administrative restructuring, decisions about ordaining women, connections with global partners and companion synods, and more recently, decisions about full communion partnerships and the status of partnered gay and lesbian clergy. While many commitments have remained constant, change is also a regular aspect of church life.

Just as the congregation I served had to face many decisions in discerning whether or not to build a new building, in the church we also have to weigh how the choices we make in the face of change align with God's will in calling us into being. Churches are not independent entities, creating their own future. Each community of faith exists in response to God's prod and call into being. This tension between what is new and innovative and what is established and well-tested stands at the heart of our Lutheran identity as a church of the reformation.

### **Luther's own lifetime**

Martin Luther, whose life spanned the years 1483–1546, lived in a time of profound change. Open to the Spirit's fresh work and deeply committed to God's



enduring promises to us through Jesus Christ, Luther led the way in helping Christians rethink what it means to be the church. In fact, Luther is regarded as a premiere reformer of the church of all time.

But Luther did more than introduce new ideas. His leadership proved to be essential in calling existing churches back to their center in the gospel of Jesus Christ. As a pastor and as a university professor, he cared deeply about the way that church leaders and ordinary Christians practiced their faith in daily life. He also cared about how new ideas were introduced—even when he felt passionately that the new ideas were correct. Luther recognized how overwhelming changes in worship life and devotional practice can be to faithful Christians and how easily an appetite for novelty can motivate some leaders to act with haste.

In the late winter of 1522, Luther returned to his home in Wittenberg, Germany, after 10 months of exile in the safety of the Wartburg Castle, where he had fled to preserve his own life. While he was absent, back in Wittenberg fellow reformers had introduced dramatic changes in the liturgy of the mass and devotional life of the people. Some parishioners welcomed the innovations as a refreshing change; others were offended to the core.

Luther preached to his fellow townspeople eight times during a single week in March 1522, addressing the work of reforming liturgy and church practices. (The sermons can be found in *Luther's Works, Volume 51*, Fortress Press, 1959, pages 69–100.) The sermons covered topics like whether or not priests can marry, the use of the visual arts in worship space, fasting, and the matter of receiving both the bread and wine in communion (which was not the ordinary practice in those days). But another theme altogether stands at the heart of that sermon series.

Day after day, Luther stood in the pulpit to remind his fellow church members that how we treat each other matters to God. He was deeply concerned that

people were so eager to draw up sides in a bid to be *right* that they had become rather callous about showing love to others in the congregation. There is no room in the church for coercion, Luther stated, nor justification for one party on an issue beating up those on the opposite side.

Over and over again in those sermons, Luther emphasized the surprising work God does in bringing about change both in the believer's heart and in the life of the congregation. He exhorted the people to remember that God does this work through the preaching of the word and the power of the sacraments, not through coercive mandates or rules or prohibitions. He admonished the people to trust that God's Word will bring to fruition the needed reforms, changing hearts and minds along the way.

### Every generation

One of the commitments we carry into this century is this understanding of the necessity of reformation in every generation. While we speak of Luther's lifetime as the Reformation era, the church is always in the process of reformation. The Latin phrase used to describe this continual renewal is *semper reformanda*, which means *always being reformed*. This motto is a reminder that our lives in Christ never stagnate and that the church in every generation is called to reassess its worship life, its public witness, and the usefulness of whatever church structures are in place.

Most of all, this description of God's dynamic interaction with the church reminds us that reformation is actually God's activity, inaugurated by the Spirit. And because the Spirit leads the way, even decisions once made can be reconsidered and reviewed in a new context.

Consider the ordination of women, a practice so common now that it is hard for many of us to imagine a time in which women could not become Lutheran pastors. In this country the formal discussions about



the ordination of women by theologians and church leaders began in the 1950s. Up until the official actions taken in 1970, however, the collective wisdom of the church was to say *no*—women may not serve as ordained pastors.

In retrospect, some of the reasons for not ordaining women seem almost laughable. Prior to 1970, even some thoughtful people assumed that women would not have the stamina to serve in this office in the church. Some thought that the desire for women's ordination was a passing fad. Yet other rationales, such as how we understand passages of Scripture that address the role of women and men in New Testament times, came to have a different persuasiveness as more scholars weighed in and church people began to examine the changing role of women in other leadership positions in our culture. In time, the original *no* became an encouraging *yes*. (You can read more about the process that led to ordaining women in Lutheran church bodies in John Reumann's *Ministries Examined: Laity, Clergy, Woman and Bishops in a Time of Change*, Augsburg Publishing House, 1987).

Was God at work all through those years of discussions and debate? Absolutely. This is what it means to say that the church is *always being reformed*. Even the most careful consideration in one decade was not the final word for all time. Only our trust that God has come to us in Jesus Christ, as a free, gracious, and life-giving gift, is so durable that we claim it as a gospel truth generation after generation.

## Reformation Sunday

When the church is faced with fresh challenges and new questions arise, we might wish we had a script that would tell us exactly what God wants us to do. That would have saved a lot of time as the congregation I served spent well over a year discussing and praying about whether or not to build a larger building. But the lessons God was teaching us in the midst of that dis-

cernment—how justice and worship are connected, how a specific neighborhood shapes outreach, and what was really needed to be a church—were as important as the final decision we made. Most importantly, our year of deliberation caused us to listen to each other carefully and lovingly over an extended period of time.

As we gather to celebrate Reformation Sunday on October 28, the handiwork of God's reforming activity is present in every congregation. This festival offers an opportunity to name some of the significant transitions and changes in a congregation's life. What have been those big watershed moments where you worship? How could you remember the founding generation, those who have taught or cooked or preached over the years, and the importance of Luther's *Small Catechism*, the Bible, and the sacraments in calling your congregation to faith and life?

Every memory of the way things used to be in our churches is linked to ideas and experiences that were once brand new and which have renewed the congregation's identity over time. What fresh signs of God's presence will you celebrate this year? Has your congregation claimed a new mission partner, welcomed new members, baptized new Christians, or explored new ways of serving in your community? Are you learning to praise God by incorporating more global hymns into your worship life? Do you have a vital relationship with a church from another part of the Christian family as an ecumenical witness to celebrate? All those deserve recognition when we celebrate the reforming work of God's Spirit in our midst.

In a church where we are always being reformed, we can count on the fact that the Living God is not done prodding us to witness to the power of the gospel in new ways and in new contexts. It is one of the best and most wonderful gifts we—and 20 centuries of Christians—have been given. 🌿

**The Rev. Patricia J. Lull** is an ELCA pastor who serves as the executive director of the Saint Paul Area Council of Churches.





## FAMILY MATTERS

### Could You? Would You? Should You?

by Sue Gamelin

**I just don't think that I** could do it. I don't think that I could do what Ann is doing and doing so well. My parents did it for 35 years. And Harold is doing it now in his 80s. What is "it"? "It" is the way that these folks have opened their homes to their grown children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, mothers, and fathers.

Ann and Harold aren't alone in doing this. The economy and changing demographics have led extended family members to unpack their suitcases in a relative's home. We know about the recession. Not only jobs and homes, but also hopes and dreams have been lost. The phrase "boomerang kids" has been invented to describe adults, including new college graduates, who have to move back in with their parents. In addition, we've learned that the age of first marriage has risen for both men (28.7 years) and women (26.5). Some of those young adults stay at home longer than young adults used to. We're also learning that immigrants and refugees are much more likely than other groups to live with members of their extended family. Given all this, one in six U.S. households is now multi-generational, and sociologists predict that these extended families may share space for quite a while.

Ann is doing this. Ann and I are part of a leadership team for an annual Lutheran women's retreat. As we were busy putting out tubes of facial mud-mask (really!) for this year's retreat, someone asked Ann, "Have you closed on your new home yet?" "Not yet," she

replied matter-of-factly. "The date for the closing keeps getting moved back." When we all sighed deeply, shaking our heads in commiseration, Ann said cheerfully, "I don't mind. It's not my dream house. I won't mind if it falls through, and I have to go out and look for another one. But the one that we're trying to close on is the right one for my family."

Her family? Ann's family includes her son and his wife, and their three little children, ages three, two, and 9 months. Ann opened wide the door of her two-bedroom apartment for them last year when they couldn't pay the bills for their modest rental home. Another son, back from military service in Afghanistan, couldn't find a job and had to move in, too. Seven people, large and small, started sharing space meant for far fewer. Ann told me that some nights the family plays "musical beds" as people trade places when someone is sick or restless. They also play "musical checkbooks and credit cards" as expenses are divvied up among them.

No wonder a new home is exciting, even if it isn't Ann's dream house. They did close on it, finally, and they've moved in. The tensions that arise when people are crowded together have eased. In this new house there is a bedroom for Ann's first son, his wife, and the baby; another for the three- and two-year-old; and a third bedroom for Ann's second son. Where's Ann? In the dining room, now "Ann's room." After all, who needs a dining room when the kitchen table is big enough for all of them to gather around?

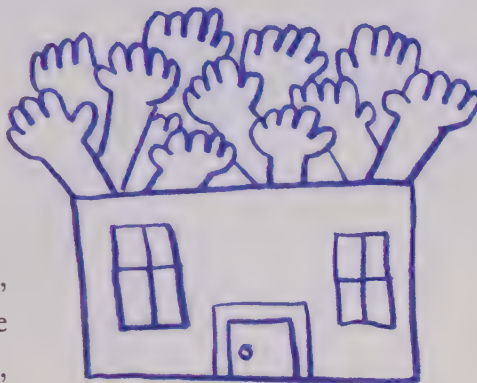




Has tension disappeared? Of course not. Tension continues, as it will in extended family households when there are different understandings about personal space, household responsibilities, child care, finances, etc. The headline from an advice column says it all: "Daughter, 40, moves home, now marriage is on rocks." If you are living in the middle of your own extended family, you know those tensions. That's why I don't know if I could do this ... or would do this.

What is absolutely certain is that joy is found in Ann's new house. Ann loves it when she gets home from her teaching job. The little kids come running when they hear the kitchen door open and jump up into her arms, giggling with happiness. On the other hand, Ann loves to lock the bathroom door, fill the bathtub, and luxuriate in a brief time of solitude. A *brief* time. Soon, all too soon, someone will knock on the door.

I don't think I could do this. I know how hard this is. I grew up with my grandma and grandpa as part of our household. My grandpa's health was poor. He had retired in 1943 just before I was born, and his pension was \$119 a




month. They lost their home in the Great Depression. They were my mom's mother and father, but it was my dad who talked my mom into welcoming them when they needed a place to live. Grandpa died 22 years later. Grandma lived to be 97. Grandpa was a saint, but Grandma was hard to live with. When Grandpa lay dying, he poignantly asked my dad not to kick Grandma out when he was gone. As if my mom and dad would! He said, "I know how difficult she can be." Right. We all knew. But our home was theirs, year after year.

When Jesus said that "foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58), I believe that he was talking about the difficulties of life and the longing for shelter that we all know. True, his circumstances were differ-

ent from ours. But he knew the pain of being thrown out of his home town (Luke 4:16-30), he knew hunger so severe that his disciples picked grain from the fields and ate it raw (Luke 6:1), and he knew the weariness that found him sitting at Jacob's well, asking a woman for a drink of water (John 4:6-7).

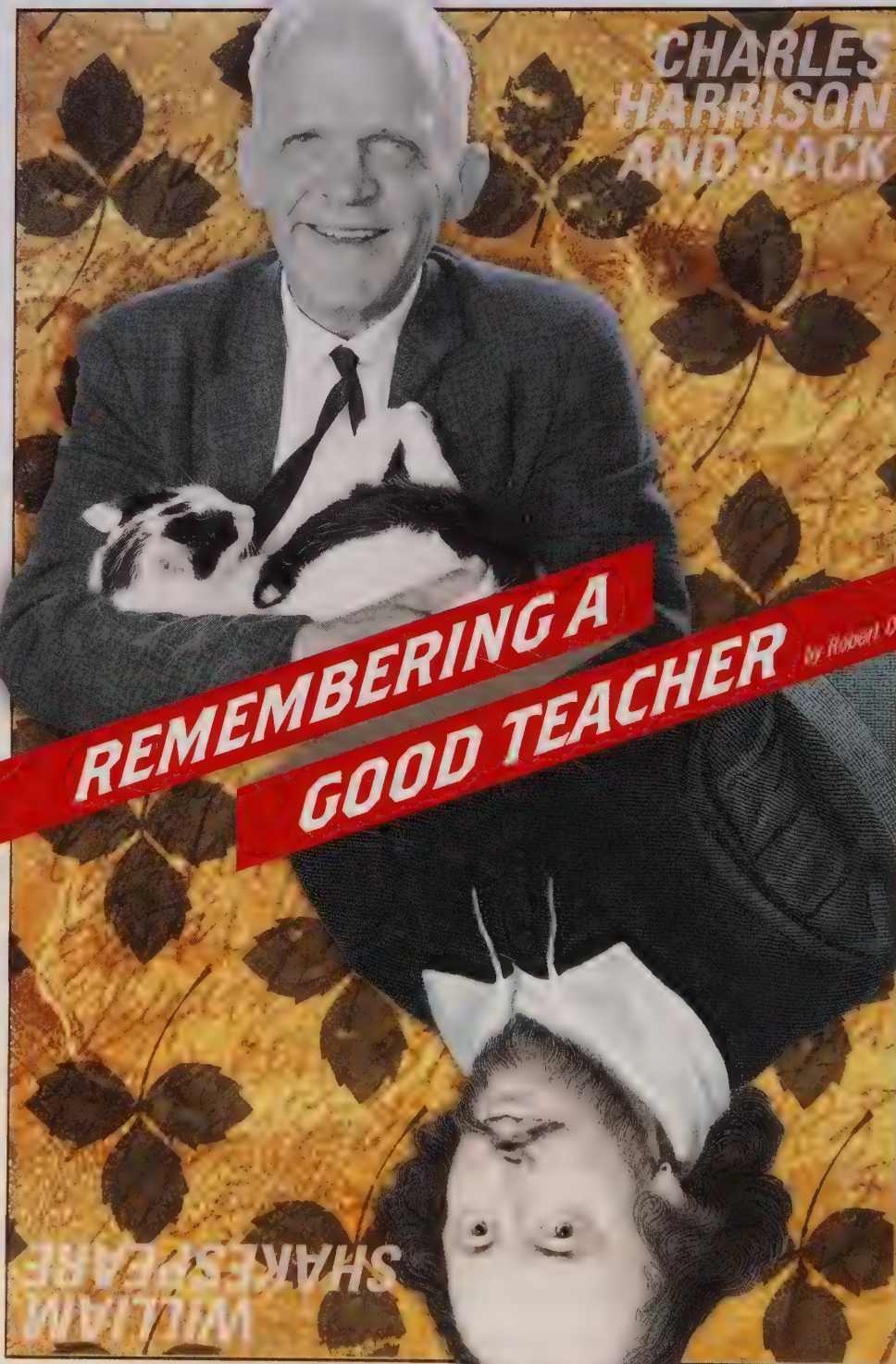
Some of Jesus' most powerful words tell us in no uncertain terms that we are to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, and visit the imprisoned (Matthew 25:31-46). We are called to welcome one another always in Jesus' name.

As Harold has. He's in his 80s and has welcomed into his humble home an assortment of nieces and nephews, grandchildren and their children who have nowhere else to turn. They come and go. He would be the first to say that this way of living isn't easy. He would be the first to say that he wouldn't have it any other way.

Could you do this? Would I? Should we? 

The Rev. Sue Gamelin is a member of the First United Methodist Church in Northampton, Massachusetts. She has four grown children and their mothers and nine grandchildren.





CHARLES  
HARRISON  
AND JACK

REMEMBERING A  
GOOD TEACHER

by Robert D. Wyatt

WILLIAM  
SHAKESPEARE



He was known respectfully as Zeus. Never as God—that would be blasphemous at a Christian college. Just plain Zeus. Zeus and Hera, the students called him and his beloved wife, Eleanor.

I heard upperclassmen debate whether there was anything that English professor Charles Trawick Harrison (Zeus) did not know. They argued that his character was so spotless that he had never sinned in his entire life. As a freshman in 1964 at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tenn., I may have been a bit skeptical. As a senior, I was increasingly certain his admirers were mostly right.

For him, teaching literature was not just a profession but a way of life. He was beloved and respected because he taught with authority and with the deep faith that reading the best that had been thought and said by the great literary figures would make all of his students, if not richer, then smarter. Above all, it would make them better—better friends, better citizens, better human beings. And he had compassion for his students, compassion for them as human beings. In my mind's eye, only Jesus was a greater teacher.

"Wherever Jesus teaches, people are astonished at his authority (Mark 1:22) and surprised by his wisdom (6:2). They flock to him in order to hear him," Audrey West says in this month's Bible study session.

Like Jesus, Charles Harrison was authoritative. Like Jesus, he cared deeply about people. Like Jesus, he could deflate the pretensions of the arrogant, the pompous, the wealthy, the condescending. He was a friend to his students, but he was not their *best friend*. He did not exist to build their positive self-esteem. He did not hang out with them and pal around with them. He was tough: tough about morality; tough about learning; tough about ethical behavior. He challenged and cajoled and asked them to stretch their mind and heart to the maximum. He taught them about human possibilities and needs and limitations. He gave them a vision of salvation. I think those characteristics are also

true of the Savior we meet in the gospels—not Jesus our best friend or Jesus the comforter of the haughty and mighty or Jesus the conveyer of unconditional positive regard. But Christ the authoritative teacher, Christ the formidable moral authority, Christ the comforter of the weak and those in need.

### *Good literature, good values*

Of course, Charles Harrison would be regarded as a relic in many of today's universities. He thought that good literature taught good values. Most of all, he believed that works of the imagination taught us all how to live a good life.

Those were the days before career education dominated colleges. Those were the days when we thought that reading Shakespeare would make us more fully human and listening to Mozart would make us more emotionally sensitive and understanding Rembrandt would make us more thoughtful. Some of us still believe those things.

I remember vividly the first class I took from Charles Harrison. It was centered on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, that magnificent medieval allegory of the moral life. Harrison led all of us day by day through the circles of Hell, populated by characters depicting the essence of the deadly sins: lust, gluttony, avarice, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride (in ascending order of importance for Dante).

Most of us were glad to learn that lust was one of the least deadly of the deadly sins, followed by gluttony. Always, Charles Harrison stressed Dante's morality.

However, it was as a teacher of Shakespeare that Harrison most excelled—where his moral authority and compassion shined most brightly. Two of the most insistent themes he identified in Shakespeare are written upon my heart to this day.

The first was his understanding of the Shakespeare's disorderly mobs. When one or another of our privileged undergraduates would seize on Shake-



speare's disorderly crowds to put down the poor, the weak, and the disempowered, Harrison was quick to point out that disorder at the bottom of the hierarchy was a mirror of disorder at the top: In Shakespeare, the common folk merely reflected the chaos embodied in their leaders. This understanding took on additional force when one remembers that I was studying under Harrison in the late '60s, when civil disobedience and violence protests were at a height.

### *The downfall of the proud*

Harrison's other insistent theme centers on how ego and ambition and vanity and wealth and power can tempt us to regard ourselves as more than truly human—as people above all constraint and limitation, greater than ordinary people with ordinary wants and needs. That is, until the trappings of wealth and privilege and power are stripped away.

For example, the arrogant young king Richard II had once thought he was the sun around whom all in England revolved—that is until his deposition by the future Henry IV becomes clear. Then comes the moment of Richard's realization of his own human needs, limitations, and obligations:

"For God's sake let us sit upon the ground  
And tell sad stories of the death of kings ....  
I live with bread like you; feel want, taste grief,  
Need friends. Subjected thus,  
How can you say to me I am a king?"  
(Richard II)

It goes without saying that Richard had mistook himself all the while as a king, as a human being above all human beings. And now, he sits upon the ground—*humus*, root of our word *humility*—where no king ever

deigns sit. And he invites his entourage to sit upon the ground with him.

Or take King Lear now on the stormy heath, but once the lofty monarch of Britain. Lear, of course, wished to retain all the perks of kingship and none of the responsibilities, thereby assigning his kingdom to his evil daughters, Goneril and Regan, while banishing his good daughter Cordelia. Then comes his humiliation at the hands of Goneril and Regan as they strip away his power and pomp and circumstance. And he finds

himself exposed  
on the heath,  
accompanied not  
by troops and servants,  
but by his fool.

After stepping aside—for the first time in his life—to let his fool seek shelter first, Lear acknowledges, like Richard, his common humanity:

"Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless night,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you  
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en  
Too little care of this." (King Lear)

Hence it is in his nakedness—devoid of the trappings of kingship—that the Lear discovers our common humanity. And the result is not only humility but compassion.

### *All things great and small*

So deep was Harrison's effect on me, so great was my admiration of him that my mother clipped a wonderful picture of the man and his cat from the Sewanee alumni magazine and had it mounted and framed for me. It hangs by my bedside to this day. Harrison's beloved cat of my era was Jack Kennedy Harrison—rescued on the day John F. Kennedy was shot. All of us English majors got to know Jack well over our four years at Sewanee.



But as my senior year drew to an end, I learned that Jack had taken ill, and I knew how devastating that was.

By tradition, the Harrisons had all of the graduating English majors over to their house for a party. It was a warm afternoon in the Cumberland Mountains. As the afternoon went on, I took a stroll through Harrison's impressive garden with a friend, and we noticed a pile of rose petals scattered near the center. When we got back to the house, I asked Harrison how Jack was. "Jack died last night," he said. "Why didn't you tell us?" I asked. "I just didn't want to talk about it," he said.

Gradually it dawned on me that he had buried Jack under a shower of rose pedals, grieving not only for him but perhaps for the president who was Jack's namesake.

The caption on that picture of Charles Harrison and Jack carried a quotation from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*: "He prayeth best who loveth best/ All things both great and small." It's hard to imagine, even now that I pray as a profession, just how well Charles Harrison must have prayed.

### **Forty commencements**

But there is no better testament to Harrison's greatness as a human being than the series of hand-written letters he sent me when I dropped out of school my junior year because of a serious illness—letters that continued

over the years. Here's a quotation from a letter he wrote after my graduation—after I had lamented sentimentally how life would never be the same after those golden years at Sewanee. Harrison replied:

"Eleanor and I were happy to get the cheerful report from you. I just wish I could join you for a ramble on the Blue Ridge [I was at the University of Virginia] or for a bit of Mozart. But I take pleasure in knowing that you have these cherishable things to enjoy.

I miss you very much. Of course—in one sense—it will never be the same again. But you and I are Platonist enough to know that, in another, it will always be the same. This is something I have had to learn: I have experienced forty commencements."

It has taken me far more than 40 commencements to learn the wisdom of eternity that Harrison so clearly understood. It is a mark of a great teacher. But, I now know that not only is our Lord with us, even unto the end of the world, but we also carry in our hearts those who have loved and nourished us. And occasionally we pause to remember them and to thank God for all that they have meant to us. ☙

The Rev. Robert O. Wyatt is rector of St. Helena's Episcopal Church in suburban Chicago. His doctoral dissertation at Northwestern University (1973) examined Shakespeare's evolving understanding of the doctrine of providence from the early histories through the tragedies, centering on Hamlet and Lear.

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LET US PRAY

## Lure and Love of Learning

by Julie K. Ageson

Many of us associate fall and the beginning of a new school year with the lure and love of learning. As a student, I loved the rituals of organizing school supplies, buying books, registering for classes, and anticipating new teachers. When I was teaching, the rhythm of the school year was even more dramatic—preparation for classes, new students, and shaping spaces that would invite and encourage the adventure of learning.

In the church we follow this same school-year rhythm, placing high value on Christian education and faith formation. The Lutheran tradition always has honored life-long learning as a key component of Christian life. Some would even call the act of learning the very life blood of what it means to be Christian. For religious Jews, interpreting Scripture is central to religious life and considered an act of holiness. Our Jewish neighbors call this “doing Midrash.” Renowned Catholic theologian, Thomas Merton, said the first step away from God is distaste for learning.

For the last almost three decades, I’ve had the privilege of sharing a center for learning—an ELCA Resource Center—with people across the church. Among the many privileges in this work are the opportunities to explore and interpret resources from a wide spectrum of writers, producers, and publishers. To this rich mix, add the bonus of regular conversations with colleagues and leaders, pastors and teachers whose passion for learning and teaching is contagious—the

very best of learning together. There’s something authentic about a church that values life-long learning. It means we know that we don’t have all the answers. It’s good to be part of a church that welcomes questions, struggles with complicated issues, and is willing to learn new things.

Poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning captured her passion for learning in a poem: “*Earth’s crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; but only [she] who sees takes off [her] shoes; the rest sit around and pluck blackberries.*” She welcomes us to the lure and love of learning by inviting us to take off our shoes on this holy ground crammed with God’s presence.

With whom do *you* gather to learn? With whom can *you* explore questions of faith and life? Studying biblical texts, stretching our minds, grappling with the mystery of being created in the image of God—these are profoundly religious acts.

So take off *your* shoes! Gather together with others who welcome questions and curiosity, who are willing to explore, who desire a life-giving faith shaped by life-long learning. Let your learning be open to the many meanings of God with us, God for us, God in us. Look for new ways of seeing and understanding God, ourselves, and the world. To my mind, this is worth giving one’s life to. To my mind, invitations to learn are glimpses of *earth crammed with heaven.* ☸

Julie K. Ageson is coordinator of ELCA Resource Centers and director of the Resource Center for the Eastern North Dakota Synod. She is a member of Bethesda Lutheran Church in Moorhead, Minn.



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## HEALTH WISE

**Kathryn Sims keeps** hitting the gym. It's not just to continue shedding weight (she's dropped 50 pounds since she started exercising in 2010). It's not just to strengthen her muscles (she can bench press six times as much weight she did then). Like millions of cash-strapped Americans, Sims is seeking to save on health-care costs. And like a growing number of insurers, her provider—the Blue Care Network of Ann Arbor, Mich.—is offering cost

breaks to policyholders who take steps to improve their health.

"In addition to saving 20 percent on my premiums, I've gotten my diabetes under better control and eased the arthritis pain in my knees," says Sims, a social worker at a facility called the Guidance Center. "If I can accomplish all this at age 64, just imagine what a younger person could do!"

A can-do attitude toward wellness may be just what the United States

## Is Your Health Coverage Healthy?

by Molly M. Ginty

### *Six Simple Steps Towards a Healthy Health Policy*

#### 1. Get the plan that's right for you.

If you're healthy and don't expect to make many doctor's visits within the next year, a lower-premium plan with a high out-of-pocket deductible may be the best fit for you. If you have ongoing health expenses, you may need a higher premium and a lower deductible. Either way, add up a year's costs: the price of your premium plus the price of your deductibles. Don't have enough money this year to pay the total sum? Then opt for a higher premium and a lower deductible. "You need to gage your expected services and find a policy that's right for you," says Susan Pisano, a spokeswoman for the trade group America's Health Insurance Plans.

#### 2. Don't scrimp.

Plans that have a "limited benefit" or are "not major medical insurance" are likely inadequate. Ditto, plans that don't offer at least \$2 million in lifetime coverage or don't pay for doctor's visits, drugs, diagnostic tests, and in- and out-patient treatment. If a policy caps coverage at \$100,000, that's of little help if cancer strikes and it costs you millions. Peg the price of a comprehensive plan built for you on [ehealthinsurance.com](http://ehealthinsurance.com). Then shop for a plan in that price range, noting that employer-sponsored coverage averages \$5,429 annually for a single person and \$15,072 for a family (with the worker paying \$921 and \$4,129 of those respective costs).



needs. Americans have developed poor health habits (half of us are living with chronic conditions on which we spend a total \$1.3 trillion per year). We have a cost-containment problem (the price of health-care premiums is rising five times faster than inflation).

Our economy is flailing (causing 14,000 of us to lose our health coverage each day). And we have staggering medical debt (one in

three Americans are struggling to pay health-care bills—up from one in five in 2010, reports the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

Authorities are working to address some of our worst health-care woes. “Thanks to President Obama’s Affordable Care Act, adults with pre-existing conditions can now get coverage,” says Kathleen Sebelius, secretary of the

Department of Health and Human Services. But with the fate of further reforms on hold until after the election, how can you make the most of your insurance policy now? See the box below to find six simple steps you can take to keep your health policy healthy. 🌿

Molly M. Ginty (<http://mollymaureenginty.wordpress.com>) lives in New York City. Her work has appeared in *Women’s eNews*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Ms*.

### 3. Check for crooks.

Before you buy, make sure a plan is reputable by talking to coworkers and by checking the National Association of Insurance Commissioners’ complaint information at [www.naic.org](http://www.naic.org).

### 4. Read the fine print.

Even if an insurer provides a bullet-point list of policy features, take the time to read the summary plan description that spells out every detail. If you don’t know the rules and don’t follow them, you could get slapped with high fees. If you have an operation that’s covered by your insurance but don’t realize that one of the attending physicians is not part of your health plan, that surgeon’s fees could wind up costing you thousands of dollars.

### 5. Join wellness programs.

Like Kathryn Sims’ workplace, 80 percent of U.S. companies are taking steps to treat their employees’ health problems, up from 51 percent in 2008. “A growing number of companies are offering monetary incentives to employees who join wellness initiatives,” says Bianca DiJulio, a policy analyst for the Kaiser Family Foundation. Employers are lowering the cost of premiums and deductibles for workers who quit smoking, join gyms, sign up for weight-loss programs—or who even agree to see their doctors once a year. If you have employer-sponsored insurance, consider joining—or lobbying to introduce—initiatives such as these.

### 6. Mind the gaps.

If you suffer a layoff, know that the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (COBRA) allows most people to continue coverage by paying the entire premium for 18 months after a job loss. Insurers can’t deny you complete coverage if you switch from one plan to the next within 63 days. If your COBRA coverage runs out, avoid that 63-day gap by getting a new plan quickly. If you’re among the 17 percent of Americans who have no health coverage, rest assured that the federal program Medicaid (see [www.medicaid.gov](http://www.medicaid.gov)) offers coverage to low-income, underemployed Americans—as do individual state-run programs (see [www.shiptalk.org](http://www.shiptalk.org)).





WE RECOMMEND

Resources for  
action, advocacy,  
programs, or  
further study

#### Family violence resource available in Spanish

Intended to be used by pastors, youth workers, and congregational leaders, "Ministry with the Abused" will help your group understand what family violence and abuse are, how to recognize if an individual is experiencing abuse, and how to offer immediate assistance to a victim. The resource includes information and statistics on elder, adult, and child violence and abuse. Use this resource to raise awareness and to help make your congregation and community safer places for families to thrive. The ELCA offers the "Ministry with the Abused" resource in Spanish as well as English. Both versions of this resource are free and can be found at [www.elca.org/justiceforwomen](http://www.elca.org/justiceforwomen) under "Social Issues" and "Violence Against Women." To learn more or to view additional resources on domestic violence, visit [www.elca.org/justiceforwomen](http://www.elca.org/justiceforwomen). Meanwhile, visit [www.womenoftheelca.org](http://www.womenoftheelca.org) to find other English and Spanish resources available for free download.

#### Gather writer contributes to new book

Terri Mork Speirs, a frequent contributor to the Living Lutheran website ([livinglutheran.org](http://livinglutheran.org)) and our magazine, has written a chapter ("The Missionary Smile Next Door") for a new book: *Keeping the Faith in Seminary*. A new release from Avenida Books of Minneapolis, *Keeping the Faith* is a compilation of essays that address issues of theological formation and vocation for people who love God, the world, and the church.

In a time when churches seem to be shrinking and religion is saturating our political discourse, this book of essays offers a conversational model where people who care about the vitality of religious life engage in intelligent and entertaining discussion. People curious about God, the church, and theology will love this book of essays.

Seminary graduates, professors and family members reflect on their experiences with humor, fondness, criticism, and ultimately, hope for what seminaries can and should be in our ever-changing world.

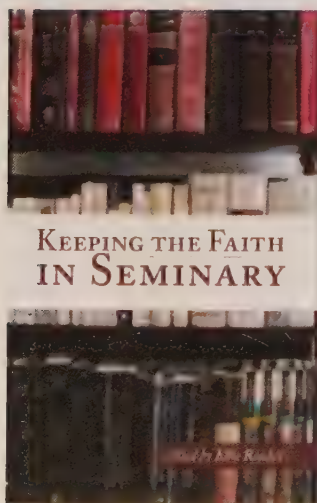
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#### Lutheran Deaconesses encourage your ministry

The Lutheran Deaconess Association encourages Christians in their own service with resources that include devotions, guides, music, and videos to aid the church body in its servant work. The LDA want to support and uphold various ministries of the church.

For example, LDA offers a "Songs of Peace and Justice" CD that can be used for Bible studies and other group discussions. You can also download (for free) devotions and reflections from the website.

Visit the LDA site to find out more about their resources at [thelda.org/resources](http://thelda.org/resources).







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Listening  
is love

by Sonia C. Solomonson

It happened nearly 13 years ago, but I can still see it clearly. My daughter-in-law Susie pulled her chair up close to my 88-year-old mother's chair because she knew Mom couldn't hear so well, especially with my young grandchildren playing and talking nearby. Susie asked Mom questions about her life and then listened ever so intently, making eye contact with Mom.

I never asked Mom about it later, but I am sure she felt completely heard and loved. Observing the total focus Susie gave Mom and her story made a deep impression on me. As Sue Bender in her book *Every-*

*day Sacred: A Woman's Journey Home* quotes a friend as saying, "Listening is love." Have you experienced that kind of listening, that kind of love?

Contrast that with conversations you've had in which the other person constantly checked her phone for text messages or scanned the room to see who else was there.

Which kind of listener are you? If you're like most people, a little of each. It depends on how your day is going, who's talking, what's happening in and around you, and more.





email, direct mail, newspaper, magazine, or billboard. In fact, many public restrooms have advertising on the inside of stall doors so we can't escape such messages even in a bathroom. Add to this all the messages we receive from coworkers, family, friends, and others with whom we have daily contact. We are at sensory overload very quickly.

It's no wonder, then, that one of our survival mechanisms is tuning out many of the messages we hear every day. We simply have to. What does that mean for how we develop our listening skills for those relationships that really matter—listening to God and really hearing our family members, friends, coworkers, and others who are important to us?

As a life coach I know the importance of listening. It's a skill I honed as a journalist and deepened in this new career. I remember being surprised in my coach training program when we were told that most coaching is done by phone. There are reasons for that: Many clients don't want to leave home for yet another appointment and prefer using a quiet space in their home for coaching conversations. Phone coaching offers a sense of safety to speak about issues that matter, and clients talk more freely in the privacy of their home. And phone coaching means you can select a coach from any city or state—or even from another country.

Though some clients desire face-to-face meetings, most prefer phone coaching. Here's what I've discovered: My hearing sense really ramps up when I coach by phone. I can't see facial expression, so I'm listening even more deeply for what's said, voice inflection, pauses, what's underneath the words that are said, and even for what's not said. My intuition operates at full capacity. I am amazed how much I hear.

Notice that the words *silent* and *listen* have the same letters. To really hear what someone is saying, to really listen, we have to be silent. We need to silence both external and internal voices (we often have as much

In the Random House Webster's College Dictionary, the third definition of "hear" is: "to listen to; give or pay attention to." And "listen" is defined as: "to give attention with the ear; attend closely for the purpose of hearing." So it would seem that attention is an important part of listening and really hearing.

#### Sensory overload

Just how easy is it these days to pay attention? *Consumer Reports* says that the average American is exposed to 247 commercial messages a day, whether by TV, radio,



internal chatter as we have messages coming at us from the outside).

Before each coaching session, I spend at least 10 minutes in prayer and meditation, clearing the channels and asking God's wisdom and guidance. I want to clear out my own concerns and cares and focus completely on what my client brings to the conversation. I want to be open to the Holy Spirit's movement in that conversation so my questions and ideas will be inspired and helpful in moving my client forward with her life.

### Opening up

When we are heard, our true selves can emerge and begin to unfold. We come to life. We need the safety of being heard and validated before we dare open up. A friend of mine who's a spiritual director often speaks of "listening someone into existence." And in my 14 years of working with a spiritual director, I know the gift in that.

Quaker author Douglas Steere put it this way: "To 'listen' another's soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another."

If listening is love, it's worth considering skills we can develop. See your listening skills as an acquired sense. Keep in mind that God gave us two ears and one mouth. We are best served if we use them in direct proportion.

To listen well and see communication as a two-way process, we might:

**ASK** more questions.

**HOLD** our responses and really listen to answers. Avoid forming your response while the other is talking. You might even say, "Let me just take a minute to think about what you said."

**LISTEN** for context: What underlies and surrounds the comments?

**KEEP** eye contact.

**KNOW** your own triggers and filters so they don't

get in the way. For example, in our first year or two together my fiancé and I had to check our assumptions about what the other was saying to see what came from our first marriages or past relationships. Such things can impede real listening.

**RESTRAIN** yourself from giving advice. Focus on listening and empathy. If people want advice, they'll ask for it. Nine times out of 10 they just want to be heard. Ask, if you're unsure.

**LISTEN** for what's *not* being said.

**WATCH** for non-verbal cues (posture, eye, or hand movements).

**DROP** your own agenda.

**ASK** for clarification if you don't understand.

**PUT ASIDE** assumptions about what you're going to hear.

**PARAPHRASE** or summarize what you've heard and understood of what the other is saying to be sure you got it right. This moves the conversation forward in a way that connects both of you in a more meaningful way.

**LOOK** for *information*, not *confirmation* of what you already think.

**SUSPEND** judgment. Sometimes we listen but when we hear something that makes us squirm, we stop the conversation.

**BE OPEN.** You may disagree. Acknowledge the right of the other to her opinion and her story.

**STOP** talking. It's that simple.

Kay Lindahl, founder of the Listening Center in Laguna Niguel, Calif., and author of *The Sacred Art of Listening* and *Practicing the Sacred Art of Listening* says that research shows the high percentage of time we spend communicating:

"... writing 9 percent, reading 16 percent, speaking 30 percent and 45 to 50 percent of our day [we're] engaged in listening, to people, music, TV, radio, etc. About 75 percent of that time we are forgetful, preoc-



cupied, or not paying attention. One of the factors influencing this statistic is that the average attention span for an adult in the U.S. is 22 seconds. It's no surprise to note the length of television commercials, are usually anywhere from 15 to 30 seconds. This constant change of focus makes it more difficult to listen for any significant length of time. Immediately after we hear someone speak, we remember about half of what they have said. A few hours later we remember only about 10 to 20 percent. Yet, less than 5 percent of us have ever concentrated on developing our skills in listening. When people hear these numbers, they often say: "This is so interesting. I know that I spend hours preparing to speak. I don't think I've ever consciously prepared to listen."

The final sentence is especially telling, isn't it? We spend hours preparing a speech—and virtually no time preparing to listen. As Winston Churchill once said, "Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen."

We need only turn on the TV to any talk show, or this year to primary elections and the presidential election, to witness the lack of hearing. People talk over the top of one another. They ask questions that are longer than any answer. They completely miss each other's point, whether intentionally or because they simply haven't listened.

And are we really any different? Are we contributing to the high noise level? What are we missing in our relationships when we don't hear?

### Listening to God

Most of us would admit that our prayer life suffers from the same problem. It's often a one-way conversation: us talking *to* God. It's too easy to hang up after we finish our monologue. Remember to mute your line and just listen ... for how can we hear the still, small voice of God without even listening? Practice the words

of Psalm 46:10: "Be still, and know that I am God!"

It's far too easy to listen without really hearing, too. Audrey West's Bible study reminds us how little Jesus' disciples really heard, and understood, of what Jesus had told them. They heard the parables over and over—and still missed the point.

This is a reminder to us, too, that we need to hear Jesus' words over and over. And we need to spend time pondering them. As West says, "The parable and Jesus' explanation invite us to linger with Jesus' words, to 'hear' the fullness of his teaching."

Linger: What a lovely invitation.

**Linger:** "to remain or stay on in a place longer than is usual or expected, as if from reluctance to leave." Another meaning of that word is: "to dwell in contemplation, thought or enjoyment."

What would happen if we linger in our important conversations? If we linger with the words afterward?

What if we saw our conversations as sacred? If they were about being present—and being a presence? How might our discussions change in our families, our communities, our congregations, our denominations (and between denominations), our society and our world?

Hear these words from J. Jeffries McWhirter in his book *Seek Wisdom*: "So let us take time together respecting the other's freedom, encouraging without hurrying, understanding that some things may never be brought to light but others may emerge if given time. Each, through this listening, enriches the other with the priceless gift of intimacy."

Why not start today with just one or two changes in your listening habits? It's a good way to share God's love and God's light in the world. After all, "listening is love." 🌿

Sonia L. Solomonson spends much of her time listening as a life coach with Way2Grow Coaching in Steamboat Hill.



# ABSOLUTE TRUTH?

by Gwen Sayler

*We were right and those who differed from us were wrong.  
Within the narrow confines of our worldview, life was that black and white.  
There was no middle ground.*

My Lutheran nephew John and his wife, Esther, were married in a Roman Catholic church. The Marty Haugen liturgy used for the wedding mass was familiar to Catholics and Lutherans alike. True to stereotype, the Lutheran side of the congregation sang lustily, while the Catholic side tended (to Lutheran ears) to mumble rather than sing. It was a joyful, inclusive worship—until the time for Holy Communion. After the words of institution, the Catholic priest brusquely instructed “Members of the church come forward to commune—the rest of you sit down.” Seated, we Lutherans sang “One bread,

one body...through all the earth, we are one body in the one Lord” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 496) while our Catholic brothers and sisters communed.

For those of us in John’s extended family, exclusion from the table of our Lord hit a doubly painful nerve because it reminded us of a part of our past that we would rather forget.

We were raised in a Lutheran denomination that practiced what we called “close communion.” Only members of that particular church body were allowed to commune; all others, including other Lutherans, were excluded. In many congregations, if unwary non-members happened to come forward to commune, they were turned away at the altar.

Taught as children that we were the only “true” Lutherans, we were proud of this practice. It was core





to our identity, distancing and distinguishing us from would-be Lutherans and other Christian denominations.

Reflecting back on those days, I remember the earnestness with which I held my black-and-white exclusionary convictions. Unquestioningly trusting my pastor, I sincerely believed that those who communed improperly did so to their damnation. It was my pastor's responsibility to stop them before they made that terrible mistake. It was my responsibility to stand firm in my faith by refusing to participate in anything that could be construed as prayer or worship with Christians or non-Christians outside my denomination.

In many ways, membership in that church body was quite comfortable. Confident that we alone knew the truth proclaimed in the Scripture because we alone possessed true doctrine, we were assured that salva-

tion was ours. All we need do was apply the proper doctrinal sound-bite to any given situation. Everything was clear; nothing was ambiguous. We were right and those who differed from us were wrong. Within the narrow confines of our worldview, life was that black and white. There was no middle ground.

#### **HEARING THE WHOLE STORY**

My gradual journey out of that denomination began the year I was assigned to a congregation as their deaconess intern. As I learned to listen to people's stories, I discovered that my neat categories did not always fit the kinds of painful decisions that people were facing. My snappy sound-bite doctrinal responses simply were inadequate to address the complex realities I was encountering.



The tension I began to feel between the “truth” as I had learned it and the realities of people’s lives came to a crisis point the afternoon I received a phone call from an unnamed woman. Speaking in what seemed to be a casual tone, she inquired whether children who died without having been baptized were damned. The doctrinally correct answer was easy—yes. But, by what I now understand as the grace of God, it was an answer I was unable to give. For perhaps the first time in my life, I spoke from my heart rather than my head; I replied “No, the God in whom I trust would never penalize a child to eternal damnation because the parents didn’t have him or her baptized. I believe the child is with the Lord.”

Hanging up, I shook from head to toe, wondering if I had put my own salvation in jeopardy. Later I learned that the woman’s little boy had died recently in an accident. Once again I shook from head to toe, this time realizing how deeply I could have hurt her if I had given her the simple, clear-cut answer I was taught to believe was absolute truth.

Hearing the woman’s whole story, understanding the reason behind her seemingly innocuous question changed how I listened and what I heard. I learned from her that taking time to investigate and listen carefully to the whole story before responding is crucial. I learned the danger that neat, black-and-white sound-bite doctrinal slogans pose for people whose lives are filled with more complexity and ambiguity than the slogans could ever envision.

That unnamed woman shook me out of the complacency of my comfortable worldview and hurled me into what I now understand as the gray, sometimes fearful, and always vulnerable world of discipleship under the cross.

## UNDER THE CROSS

Today, when I listen to the verbiage filling the air-waves as yet another election season unfolds, I confess that

I am troubled by political rhetoric that on a secular level eerily echoes the “true doctrine” approach to life’s issues that I learned in my childhood. Daily, we are inundated by commercial sound bites and computer-generated phone messages trying to motivate us to vote for whichever candidate or party or position is paying for the advertisement. Repeatedly, these messages reduce complex issues to simple slogans. Ambiguities disappear. There is no middle ground. Claiming complete control of the truth, one side accuses the other of rapidly hurling the country down the slippery slope to defeat and damnation.

The same is true of many radio and TV talk shows. Playing on our fears and hitting vulnerable nerves we may not even realize we have, hosts lambast the side they oppose as undermining everything we hold sacred. Then they laud the side they support as the upholder of all that is true and good. Often these hosts are people we trust. We want to believe that their clear-cut black-and-white worldview is accurate and absolutely true. If they are right, then we can be comfortable in the confidence that we are right too.

The human desire to be free from complexity and ambiguity, to be in control of the whole truth is as old as our first ancestors in the Garden of Eden. That desire led to sin, the results of which continue to infect us today. Yet, as we confess in worship, we who are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves are daily forgiven by God through Jesus Christ and freed to walk in the newness of life. In baptism God poured out on us the Holy Spirit, gracing us with a new identity and sending us forth equipped through the Spirit’s power to live as disciples under the cross.

Jesus’ earthly life bears witness to what discipleship under the cross involves. Far from proclaiming a Kingdom of God free from ambiguity and complexity, Jesus entered into the messy middle gray areas of people’s actual lives. Listening attentively to their stories, he proclaimed the Kingdom in which God through Jesus



embraces people precisely in the midst of the complexities and ambiguities that are the “stuff” of their lives. In this Kingdom, the need to be right gives way to the call to be faithful in making the healthiest decisions possible in the less-than-clear messiness of life. It is into this Kingdom that we were baptized and given our call to a discipleship that extends into every arena of our lives, including the political.

## HOLDING ONTO BIBLICAL VALUES

Grounded in our baptismal identity, confident that God in Jesus Christ daily and richly forgives all our sins, we are free to acknowledge that life is lived in the gray rather than in the black and white, and to approach political and social issues accordingly. Becoming informed citizens by examining contested issues from a variety of perspectives, we are equipped to resist the allure of sound-bite solutions to complex issues. Refusing simply to accept the word of media pundits citing isolated Bible verses as absolute truth, we are prepared to listen closely to the actual stories of people impacted by proposals, and to factor those stories into our decision-making.

As disciples under the cross, we do not engage in this sometimes cumbersome discernment process alone. Whenever we gather for prayer, sharing, and Bible study, the Holy Spirit is at work grounding us in the biblical values that should inform our decisions. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, these values include but are not limited to:

- > concern that the most vulnerable in society have access to resources necessary for physical, mental, and spiritual flourishing;
- > commitment to justice for those whose race, class, nationality, religion, or gender identity mark them as different from us;
- > refusal to bury complexity under the guise of neat right-and-wrong categories that harm rather than enhance the lives of people affected by them.

With these biblical values as our anchor, discipleship under the cross sends us into the middle gray messiness of our world rather than freeing us from it. In the middle, certainty of absolute truth gives way to a spectrum of possible faithful responses to complex issues. We will not always come to the same answer. That is part of the process. Realizing that no one on this side of heaven possesses absolute truth, what counts is that we make our usually less-than-perfect decisions as responsibly as we can. We are called to be faithful, not right.


Forgiven and freed by grace from the fear of failure, we can let go of the pain of past decisions that continue to hit painful nerves within us.

Forgiven and freed by grace from the need to fit life into neat categories, we are free to be open to new things the Spirit may be working in, among, and through us.

Forgiven and freed by grace, we are free to just say “no” to rhetoric that divides and distances rather than includes and invites.

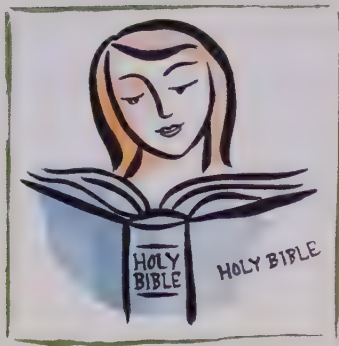
Will we get it wrong sometimes? Almost certainly. So what should be our rule of thumb? How do we know where to stand? Writing about her own painful process of coming to deal with her sexuality, a friend of mine once coined what I find to be a helpful rule. “It is dangerous to call clean what God has declared unclean. But it is even more dangerous to call unclean what God has declared clean.”

One day, when God brings all creation to completion, we—the one bread, one body in Christ in all our diversity—will know the whole truth.

Until then, we are free to be guided by the axiom: “If I err, let it be on the side of grace.” This is the sometimes fearful and always vulnerable world of discipleship under the cross. Here we stand. We are called to do no other. 

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GATHERED BY GOD SESSION 2

# LEARNING THE TOUGH STUFF

by Audrey West

## BIBLE STUDY

### Theme Verse

*"Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land." (Mark 4:1)*

### Opening Hymn

"Lord, Speak to us, that we may speak" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 676)

### Overview

Jesus' favorite teaching method was to speak in parables, that is, word pictures or stories drawn from everyday life that convey surprising truths about the good news of God. For his listeners, the parables were often difficult to understand. Even so, they kept gathering around him again and again to listen and learn. What might happen if we were to do the same thing?

### Being there

Have you ever had a really good teacher? The kind who knows just the right way to explain a difficult concept or keep you engaged and interested in the topic, even when you do not understand it? Perhaps

it is a teacher who opened your mind to new ideas, or helped you to believe in yourself, or gave you the tools you needed to get out of a desperate situation at home, or who gave you the courage to try something you never thought possible. These are the teachers who keep their students coming back to class, who give their students a reason to study and grow. (See "Remembering a Good Teacher," p. 12.)

We discover in the Gospel of Mark that Jesus is just this sort of teacher, with a reputation that is established quite early in his ministry. His primary lesson: to proclaim the good news of God, that the "kingdom of God has come near" (Mark 1:14-15). The first thing

that Jesus does in Mark's gospel after calling disciples is to go to the synagogue, where he teaches with such authority that it astounds the people who are gathered there (Mark 1:21-22).

Jesus illustrates his teaching with a visual example of the nearness of God—a first-century show-and-tell—by healing a man right there in the synagogue. Mark reports that as a result of this first synagogue lesson, Jesus' fame begins to spread throughout the whole region, and before much longer crowds of people are gathering around him to listen to the lessons he imparts. Our first study text recounts one of those lessons.

1. **READ ALOUD MARK 4:1-9,** paying special attention to the content of Jesus' teaching in the parable of the sower. When you have finished reading, close your Bible and retell the parable in pairs. It is not necessary to recall every word, but do your best to stick with the details that are presented in Mark.



2. After you have re-told the parable, go back and check your Bible to see what you missed. What grade would you give yourself as a student of this parable? Imagine what it would be like to hear this parable without the benefit of being able to go back and read it again!

### Jesus as teacher

Jesus is called many things in the Gospel of Mark, but the title of Teacher (or sometimes in the translation, Rabbi, which means the same thing) is the one used more than any other by those who speak to him. Disciples, people who come to him for healing, and even opponents—some of whom use the title sarcastically as they try to trick him with their legal puzzles—recognize Jesus as a person who has important things to say. His classroom is the synagogue, the shores of the lake, or anywhere crowds are gathered around him. On occasion Jesus teaches inside a house, where he offers private tutorials to his closest disciples when they question him about his lessons.

Wherever Jesus teaches, people are astonished at his authority and surprised by his wisdom. They flock to him in order to hear him. Over and over again, Mark tells us that crowds surrounded Jesus; indeed, based on his reputation, Jesus probably could have won a prestigious teaching award, if such a thing had been given to wandering teachers in his day.

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### It's Greek to me: Disciple

The word *disciple* comes from the Greek verb, *to learn*. Thus, when Jesus calls disciples, he is calling *learners*.

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Reputation is no guarantee of success, however. Plenty of people have trouble catching on to the gist of Jesus' message.

Jesus' favorite mode of instruction is the parable, a

short story or verbal image that clothes its lessons in symbolic language and, typically, includes a surprising twist. Like the parable of the sower, Jesus' parables use common images from the rural agricultural life of his first followers: seeds, soil, birds, sowing, planting, harvest. Even with those familiar details however, those followers often have trouble making heads or tails of the parables. As a result, some scholars refer to the parables as "riddles," a reminder that their meanings are not always self-evident. (See "Luke Loves to Tell the Story," p. 36.)

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### It's Greek to me: Parable

The Greek word for *parable* means "to cast alongside," that is, to set something that is well known (like a person sowing seeds) alongside of something that is less known (like the ways of God). Jesus' parables reveal truths about ourselves and God that might otherwise remain hidden, so that we might hear and understand.

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As the first parable in Mark (and in Matthew and Luke), the parable of the sower can teach us something about the rest of Jesus' parables, including how parables work, what is their function, how the disciples respond to parables, and so forth. Just as the crowds are gathered around Jesus to hear his teaching in parables, we are invited to gather with them, to share their classroom beside the Sea of Galilee. We can learn from their experience even as we hear Jesus speak through the parable to the circumstances and realities of our own day.

If Jesus were standing beside you, and you could ask him a question about the parable or its meaning, what would you ask him? Keep track of your questions so that you can see if any of them are answered as a result of this study.



## Listen! Did you hear?

"Listen up!" Jesus calls out, as people strain to hear his words: "A sower went out to sow ... " Scattered seeds, rocky ground, hungry birds, scorching sun, choking weeds: It is all there, along with a patch of good soil that makes it possible for the seeds to grow and produce a magnificent yield. "Let anyone with ears to hear Listen!" Jesus says, as he concludes the parable. Those two commands to listen form an *inclusio* (that is, a frame) around the parable, suggesting that there is something crucial about listening (or hearing) that is important to Jesus' teaching.

At many points in Mark's gospel the importance of listening to Jesus takes a central role. On one occasion Jesus takes Peter, James and John with him to the top of a mountain, where he is transfigured into a dazzling figure before them. As the disciples try to make sense of this remarkable event, a voice booms out from heaven, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (Mark 9:7)

On another occasion, Jesus responds to a question from a well-educated scribe who wants to know what is the greatest of all the commandments. Quoting from the Old Testament, Jesus puts listening at the center of everything. The greatest, most important commandment is this: "Hear, O Israel," (or, "Listen!") Jesus says, "the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:29–31).

"Hear, O Israel!" the Scriptures say. Jesus expands the reference beyond those ancestors in the faith, as if to say, "Listen up, O Church!" (See "Listening is Love," p. 22.)

12 In your experience, what things help you hear Jesus? What things get in the way or make it difficult? (Hearing may include receiving, understanding, attending to, believing, etc.)

## Some things are hard to understand

5. **READ ALOUD MARK 4:10–20.** What does the passage suggest as some of the reasons that people might have difficulty understanding Jesus' parables? List these, and compare the list to the answers you gave in question 4. What similarities (or differences) do you see?

Some of the people who are gathered around Jesus are better learners than others, a truth that applies today every bit as much as it applies to the people depicted in the Gospel of Mark. Even within the church, some people seem to catch on to who Jesus is and they embody his teaching in their own lives. Others do not.

In verses 11–12, Jesus suggests that when it comes to understanding the parables these two kinds of people may be identified as insiders and outsiders. Insiders are given the secret of the kingdom. The word for *secret* here can also be translated as *mystery*, and in the Jewish context of Jesus and his disciples, it typically refers to something that would remain unknown unless it were revealed by God. Jesus suggests that this secret mystery has been given to the disciples and "those who were around him" (4:10).

Those who stay close to Jesus and ask about the parables will receive the gift of understanding. However, he says, to those who are outside, everything comes in parables.

Of course, this raises the question of who is inside and who is outside, especially since Jesus teaches in parables much of the time, regardless of who is in the audience: "With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables..." (Mark 4:33–34).

We might assume that the disciples, as the ultimate insiders to Jesus, would have the corner on interpreting and understanding the parables. After all, they are actually present with Jesus, so they have the benefit of hearing his tone of voice, seeing his gestures, even speaking the same language that he does (not to mention the



opportunity to ask the Teacher himself whenever they need clarification). If anybody can understand the secret that unlocks the key to Jesus' teaching, surely they should be able to do so.

6. Look up the following passages in Mark and note the level of the disciples' understanding: Mark 6:51–52; 7:17–18a; 8:17–18, 21; 9:32. What might be the point with the Gospel of Mark showing repeatedly that the disciples do not understand Jesus or the parables?

The fact that the disciples do not get it is ... well, it might be considered a little embarrassing. After all, we're talking about Peter, James, and John and the other pillars of the faith who quit their jobs as fishermen and followed Jesus when he called without even questioning what they would do as his disciples. If they do not understand Jesus' teachings, what hope is there for the rest of us?

The disciples' lack of understanding suggests that the initial decision to follow Jesus is not the end of the story for anyone who wants to be a good learner (disciple). It takes time (especially time with Jesus), experience, and perhaps even the benefit of insight from fellow disciples in order to become the sort of "good soil" that will fully receive Jesus' teaching and nourish its growth.

Beyond all that, it takes a willingness to go back to Jesus again and again to listen, to experience his ministry, and hear his words. After telling his readers that Jesus "did not speak to them except in parables," Mark adds this: "but he explained everything in private to his disciples" (Mark 4:34). Continuing to learn from Jesus seems to be the way to cultivate oneself to become good soil. (See "Absolute Truth?" p. 26.)

### Understanding all the parables

Mark 4:2 suggests that the parable of the sower is an example of the "many things in parables" that Jesus

taught. In Mark 4:13, Jesus connects one's understanding of this parable with the understanding of "all the parables." These two statements suggest that Jesus' explanation of the parable has to do not only with this particular parable, but with parables in general. Could it be that the parable of the sower is a parable about parables?

If we stand with the disciples and ask Jesus about the parables, we receive an allegorical explanation of the parable of the sower. Just as birds, rocks, thorns and scorching sun can prevent a seedling from flourishing, so too can evil, troubles, persecution, the lure of wealth and the cares of the world get in the way of the fruitful faithfulness that comes from hearing Jesus' teaching (Mark 4:10 and following). Meanwhile, those who "hear the word and accept it" are like good soil that produces fruit in abundance.

First, take just one element from the interpretation, such as "the word sown among the thorns" (Mark 4:19). Did you notice that Jesus' explanation sounds almost as much like a parable as the parable itself? He does not offer step-by-step instructions, nor does he say exactly which cares and desires are the ones that "choke the word," or what it means in concrete terms to "bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold" (Mark 4:20). From the interpretation that Jesus gives, it appears that the secret is not a quick and easy answer; rather, it takes time to grow, just as the seeds grow and thrive only over time. (The fact that the disciples are so slow to understand may be another example of the same point: Their understanding will grow only over time as they are receptive to Jesus and his teaching.)

Jesus' explanation of the parable of the sower invites his disciples—then and now—to work out the parable's meaning in their own lives. It asks them not only to "hear" Jesus' word, but to "accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold" (Mark 4:20).

The parable and Jesus' explanation invite us to linger with Jesus' words, to hear the fullness of his teach-



ing. As we ask “what does this mean?” the parable does its work—engaging, provoking, challenging, empowering, encouraging, and inviting us into relationship with the One who speaks in veiled language for the purpose of revealing the hidden things of God.

Our desire to learn draws us closer to Jesus, and we become like good soil.

### Parables as hidden invitation

#### 7. **READ MARK 4:21–25** and fill in the blanks below:

The purpose of a lamp is not to be hidden, but to be on the lamp stand.

If something is hidden it will \_\_\_\_\_

If something is secret it will \_\_\_\_\_

Based on the answers (above), how would you complete the following sentence?

If parables are difficult to understand, they \_\_\_\_\_

According to Jesus’ explanation, the purpose of parables is to reveal what is hidden, to bring to light what is secret. Jesus also seems to be saying that our desire for understanding will be repaid in greater understanding. “The measure you give,” that is, your desire to learn from Jesus, “will be the measure you get, and still more will be given to you. For to those who have [a little bit of understanding] more will be given.” Those who do not have the desire to learn from Jesus (“from those who have nothing”) will continue to be baffled by the parables and indeed by all that Jesus says, does, and is.

Jesus’ explanation suggests that the closer we are to Jesus, the more we will understand about the messages he imparts through the parables, even when those messages are difficult ones. It also implies that one of the purposes of the parables is actually to draw people in, to give them reasons to come closer, to become insiders with Jesus. Do you want to understand Jesus’ teaching? Get closer to Jesus, and he will give you the secret of the kingdom of heaven.

Since the precise interpretation of the parables is not spelled out (as we have seen, even Jesus’ explanation of the parable of the sower uses images to make its points), we dare not become smug about knowing all the answers. Instead, we are invited to become good soil by cultivating a spirit of attention to Jesus’ words and hearing his teaching, letting the message do its work inside of us in order to bring forth fruit.

### Teaching and Learning the Tough Stuff

There are several characteristics about parables that suggest that they are a fruitful teaching method for Jesus, especially when he is teaching the crowds that gather around him. Which of the following best identifies something that you have learned during this session as you have gathered with your study group? (You may choose more than one.) What would you add to the list?

Parables deliver their messages in veiled language, inviting hearers to return to Jesus to learn more.

Parables keep us from becoming too self-righteous about our grasp of Jesus’ teaching. Just when we think we know it all, a parable can suggest meanings we might not have considered before.

Parables show us things we might not normally see about ourselves (for example, the parable of the sower in Mark 4 invites us to ask ourselves whether we are letting our “troubles” keep us from receiving Jesus’ word (verse 17)? Is our “desire for other things” getting in the way of hearing Jesus (verse 19)? What about the “lure of wealth”? (verse 19)

Parables are not simply nice stories to be understood; they push us to live out our understanding in our lives (to be “good soil”).

Parables are able to speak to multiple situations or circumstances, so that there is not simply “one, right answer” for understanding them.



Parables remind us to keep eyes and ears attuned to Jesus so that we might be among those who “have ears to hear,” and that we might be fruitful in faithfulness.

Parables suggest that we should not become so comfortable with the status quo that we are unable or unwilling to change.

### Looking ahead

Next month Jesus invites us to “come and see” what it is like to be in the presence of the one “who came down from heaven.” We will join the crowds in the Gospel of John as they eat their fill of five barley loaves and a couple of fish, with more pieces left over than there were to begin with. In the abundance on the mountain-side, we will gather to be fed with the bread of life, so that none may be lost.

### Closing Prayer

Holy God, Your word is a seed growing among us, bearing its fruit. Thank you for sending your beloved Son, Jesus, who is for us the best interpretation of your desire for the world. Help us to gather near him always that we might hear your word and be good soil; and give us courage and strength to remain open to whatever you would reveal to us, through Jesus Christ, our best Teacher and your Son, who died for us so that we might live. In his name we pray, Amen. 🙏

Audrey West holds a Ph.D. in New Testament from Duke University as well as degrees from Yale Divinity School. She has served on the faculty of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, as a visiting professor at Yale Divinity School, and in the Luther Seminary D/M.A. program in biblical preaching. She is the author of the 2004 (15) award-winning Bible study, “Everyday Surprises: The Parables of Jesus,” published by Lutheran Women Day (now Gather). Audrey lives with her spouse and several four-legged infants in Bethlehem, Pa.

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the 2012–2013 Bible study by Audrey West

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# Luke Loves to Tell the story

by Carol Schersten LaHurd

When the Christian world celebrates the feast day of St. Luke on October 18, he will be praised as evangelist, beloved physician, artist, and the gospel writer who mostly fully portrays Mary, the mother of Jesus. Some of what we know about Luke comes from church tradition. One trait we can know from the Bible itself is that Luke was an exceptional storyteller.



In Luke's gospel, shortly after calling the 12 disciples, Jesus enters Capernaum, a busy port on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. There he heals the servant of a Roman centurion, then walks on to Nain with an entourage of disciples and onlookers. At that moment, a procession carrying the deceased only son of a widow is leaving town. Jesus touches the bier and commands the young man to rise. Immediately the crowd glorifies God and cries out, "A great prophet has risen among us!" (Luke 7:16)

Luke's gospel uses these two dramatic scenes to set the stage for an important exchange between Jesus and the disciples of John the Baptist. Recall that in Luke's story of Jesus' birth we learned that John's mother Elizabeth and Jesus' mother Mary are cousins. But Luke is vague about whether their two sons had contact as adults.

Now that Jesus' public ministry is underway, John sends two disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Luke 7:19) How does Jesus answer this crucial question? Not by claiming to be the one sent from God, as Jesus often does in John's gospel. Instead, in Luke, Jesus answers with the stuff of story: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them" (Luke 7:22).

### A STORYTELLING TEACHER

The scene from Luke 7 exemplifies Luke's portrayal of Jesus. Luke is a teacher who uses stories to reveal who Jesus is and how he fulfills God's promise. Luke's literary toolkit includes setting details, colorful characters, dramatic dialogue, and recurring themes. Luke's references to people and places orient Jesus' birth in history: "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ..." (Luke 2:1-4).

Unique to Luke's gospel is the Jericho encounter between Jesus and the colorful character Zaccheus, described as "chief tax-collector, rich, and short in stature." Luke not only shows Zaccheus scrambling up a sycamore tree to watch Jesus pass by, he recreates their conversation to convey several important themes throughout the gospel. The importance of hospitality is underscored when Jesus calls up to Zacchaeus, "Hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." The crowd's reaction reminds us that Jesus often sought table fellowship with sinners. The themes of right use of possessions and care for the poor reach us in Zacchaeus' immediate response to this engagement from Jesus: "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."

Finally, Luke's emphasis on Jesus' role in continuing God's promises to the people of Israel and extending these promises to all of humankind comes in Jesus' closing words, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost" (Luke 19:1-10). All this is packed into one short story.

### THE POWER OF STORIES

We know from experience that stories not only teach, they can transform their listeners and readers. Some of us remember watching the 1977 television dramatization of Alex Haley's family saga "Roots." For African-Americans the episodes represented mainstream attention to their histories dating back to Africa and the agonizing experience of slavery. For many others the mini-series was their first encounter with the devastating impact of slavery over many generations.

More recently stories have helped visitors to the Holy Land understand how the ongoing conflicts there affect both Palestinians and Israelis—and have moved American Christians to advocate for peace with justice. In January 2009 more than 40 Lutheran bishops from



the United States and Canada toured the region, visited holy sites, and met with religious, political, and local community leaders. For many the most transformative experience was the evening with two representatives of the Parents Circle-Families Forum ([www.theparentscircle.org](http://www.theparentscircle.org)), an organization of some 500 Israelis and Palestinians who have lost family members in the conflict.

Why was that night so powerful? Those present heard first-hand the stories of two men who have become friends and co-speakers. The first was an Israeli Jew who lost his 14-year-old daughter in a 1997 bus bombing conducted by Palestinians. The second was a Palestinian Muslim whose 62-year-old unarmed father was shot by Israeli soldiers when traveling back from his job in Jerusalem in 2002. Hearing these stories made real the losses and hopes of ordinary people. Later, the bishops' written and online reports enabled hundreds more to participate in this experiential learning.

Neuroscience research backs up this example of the value of hearing and reading stories. Brain scans show that reading a story stimulates the same area of our brains as if we were actually doing the activity described, recalling the advice to "practice your tennis serve in your mind." Cognitive scientist and novelist Keith Oatley has proposed that "reading produces a vivid simulation of reality, one that 'runs on minds of readers just as computer simulations run on computers.'" Reading stories can enable us to share the characters' experiences. Research by Oatley and psychologist Raymond Mar suggests that people "who frequently read fiction seem to be better able to understand other people, empathize with them and see the world from their perspective" (from "Your Brain on Fiction" by Annie Murphy Paul, *The New York Times*, March 17, 2012).

## TELLING PARABLES

In all four gospels, but especially in Luke, Jesus understands the power of stories. As Audrey West suggests in this month's Bible study session, on some occasions

(such as in Mark 4) Jesus seems to be teaching in parables to reach his insider followers, while keeping outsiders in the dark. In some cases Matthew, Mark, and Luke add theological explanations to Jesus' initial story, such as the Parable of the Sower in Mark 4, Matthew 13, and Luke 8. In Luke Jesus tells several more detailed and multi-layered parables that do not appear in the other gospels. These include the Good Samaritan, the Rich Fool, and the Rich Man, and Lazarus.

Also found only in Luke's gospel is the especially beloved parable of the Father and Two Sons. Luke leads up to this dramatic story with the parables of the Lost Sheep (also in Matthew) and the Lost Coin, only in Luke. Through concrete details we readers/listeners experience the prodigal younger son's decline into poverty and despair, as he is sent to feed unclean pigs and "would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything" (Luke 15:16). Similar details recreate the depth of the father's joy at the son's return and his readiness to forgive. The father runs to meet his son and offers him symbols of royalty: a kiss, a robe, sandals, and a banquet in his son's honor.

If the parable ended happily there, Jesus as teacher in Luke would have succeeded in enabling his listeners to feel the intensity of God's unconditional love for all sinners. But Jesus goes beyond to add a very realistic twist. The faithful older brother is furious at the welcome given his wastrel brother and refuses to join the public celebration. Instead of rebuking his older son for this insulting and disrespectful behavior, the father reaffirms his commitment to both sons: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found" (Luke 15:31-32).

This dramatic narrative draws us into the experience of God's love. It also prods us to ask, "Who is this older brother?" The opening verses of chapter 15



ent at one answer: "Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" For centuries, interpreters of Luke 15 have concluded that Jesus—or at least Luke—is saying here that the first century Jews who have rejected Jesus' good news will also be rejected. But a careful reading of this parable reveals its open-endedness. The parable is complex. We don't know whether the older brother will return to the family. What we do know is that the father reaffirms his relationship with his angry older son.

## TELLING OUR OWN STORIES

Paying attention to how effectively both Jesus and Luke use the power of stories can inspire us to do a better job of telling both biblical stories and stories from our own lives. Audrey West reminds us that the gospels are meant to be read aloud.

At my congregation in Chicago, the annual Easter Vigil features dramatic readings of biblical passages that bring alive their humor, intensity, and emotional meaning. Each year we are re-engaged by stories we have heard many times.

A number of my colleagues in the academic Society of Biblical Literature use dramatic storytelling in both ministry and teaching. Methodist Tom Boomershine co-founded the Network of Biblical Storytellers ([www.nbsint.org](http://www.nbsint.org)) and has produced short videos of gospel episodes, such as the healing of blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10. Joanna Dewey uses role-playing to teach the gospels at the Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Mass. David Rhoades at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago presents dramatic readings of entire New Testament books. He and LSTC colleagues also maintain the online Biblical Performance Criticism ([www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org](http://www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org)) to share and analyze the Bible in some of the ways familiar to the oral culture of the early church.

At South Dakota's Augustana College, professor Richard W. Swanson leads the Provoking the Gospel Project ([provokingthegospel.com/TheProcess.html](http://provokingthegospel.com/TheProcess.html)). A multi-age troupe creates and performs such biblical dramas as "Women Who Were Watching: Gender in the Gospels" and "Telling Stories About Resurrection in a World Where Everyone Dies."

Telling and performing biblical stories can bring people to the experience and theology of the Bible in new and effective ways. ELCA missionaries, Young Adults in Global Mission, and World Council of Churches Ecumenical Accompaniers are demonstrating the power of telling their own stories through blogs and online newsletters, such as [www.elca.org/handinhand](http://www.elca.org/handinhand). Several young adults serving the Lutheran church in the Holy Land filled their monthly newsletters with photos and stories about observing Lent and Holy Week alongside Palestinian Christians. Another recounted her stay with a Bedouin family living in the Negev Desert. (Read more at [www.elca.org/peacenotwalls](http://www.elca.org/peacenotwalls).)

Former churchwide communication specialist Sue Edison-Swift shared the legacy of the late *Lutheran Woman Today* columnist Marj Leegard in the blog "20 questions to prompt effective storytelling" ([blogs.elca.org/handinhand/post/20-questions-for-storytelling-18072010](http://blogs.elca.org/handinhand/post/20-questions-for-storytelling-18072010)). Some examples: Where's the hope? Where's the humor? Where's the call to action (prayer, advocacy, giving)? How does this illustrate God active in the world? Consulting this list can help us tell and write stories that better give voice to our faith and life.

Luke, like Jesus, was a powerful storyteller. Their legacy is our experience of the good news today. We can learn from their skill to develop our own storytelling as a way to share the good news with others. 🌿

**Carol Schersten LaHurd** is adjunct professor at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and former coordinator of the Middle East peacemaking campaign of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.






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## RACE NOTES

# Sisterhood

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



I'm the youngest in my family; I have two older brothers. Growing up, I always wanted a sister. I was a bit envious of my friends with sisters. They had someone to share so much with—curling irons, confidences, sweaters, even boyfriends. My envy focused on the good aspects of being sisters. It wasn't until I was older that I began to understand about the back-biting, name-calling, and pettiness that can sometimes infest sisterhood.

One of the reasons I was drawn to the women's organization many years ago was rooted in my childhood desire for a sister. I had just finished graduate school and was settling into my adult life. I wanted to be with other women who could share confidences and dreams, who could love and support me on good and bad days, and who could spare me some heartache and encourage me to better things. And for the most part, that is what I have found in the women I have known in Women of the ELCA. That's not to say that in the women's organization I haven't encountered some of the back-biting, name-calling, and pettiness that can sometimes infest sisterhood. Human nature is such that when we don't like something we are quick to complain loud and long.

Beyond the DNA that binds women who are sisters by birth, what those women share is community. Sisters live in community with one another. We all crave community. When we function at our best as Women of the ELCA, we are "a community of women created

in the image of God," as our purpose statement reminds us. In all of God's wisdom, we women were designed not to live in isolation or in competition, but to live and thrive in community, drawing upon the gifts of healing, leadership, and inclusion.

In her book *The Friendship of Women: A Spiritual Tradition*, Sister Joan Chittister tells us that women's friendships "are new hope for the human race, if we can only recognize them, if we can only bring them to life—respected, revered, and invested with honor—in the world around us." We can transform public institutions, Sister Joan tells us, if the best of what it means for women to be in community can be shared with the whole world. That brings us to another portion of our purpose statement: As Women of the ELCA we have committed "ourselves to promote healing and wholeness in the church, the society and the world."

This year we celebrate 25 years of mobilizing women to act boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ. We celebrate 25 years of creating a just world, supporting global sisters, bringing about health and wholeness. Make a gift now to our 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Offering. Every dollar goes to support the ELCA Malaria Campaign (50 percent) and Women of the ELCA (50 percent). Your gifts will support our ministry—and medicine, clean water, and advocacy for those who are affected by malaria around the world. ☸

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.





AMEN!

## Generous Gardener

by Catherine Malotky

**My eyes are closed.** I am breathing deeply, trying to clear my head and my heart to listen, as you have commanded, God. There are so many things taking up space inside me:

people I love with challenges to remember in prayer;

a long list of to-dos to keep on top of so we have food in the cupboard and can take a vacation now and then;

church commitments that invite me to give my best;

civic responsibilities like voting (am I sufficiently informed?) and engaging in issues I care about.

That's a lot to keep straight. My heart and my head are buzzing with all of it. I am busy trying to be a good disciple, to be your hands in the world. My business can be a hindrance, a distraction. Those good deeds can keep me from you. Like Satan tempting Matthew's Jesus to turn the stones into bread (Matthew 4:3-4), I can be tempted to see my work on your behalf as too important, and I can forget that in the end, this is your creation and we are your people. Your seed in me doesn't get a chance to sprout when I am busy trying to be the savior!

This is the irony, isn't it? I am so busy that I neglect to leave space for you to speak. I do not take time to notice you at work in my life or in the world around me. Or, like the seed thrown on rocky soil, I get all excited about the moments that are above average. I sprout enthusiasm, I want to capture the moment and never leave. But those kinds of moments

were meant to feed the ones that follow and I too often don't take the time to recall them as sources of on-going learning and support. I don't take the time to notice what you are teaching me.

Sometimes, God, when I manage to settle myself, when my industry and my enthusiasm settle down, then my fear has time to emerge from the shadows. I look around and see a troubled world. I see bullying: children against children, neighbors against neighbors, rich against poor, nations against nations, governments against their people, and between generations. I see it in politics. I see it in the moment, and I see it over the long term. We gossip and we pollute. Really, God? You are a redeemer? Why is it all still such a mess? The thorns are sturdy and resourceful in this garden, and sometimes they take advantage of my best efforts to believe.

Yet it is true that you continue to sow the seed of your love among us. You continue to create. You continue to call us to life. You promise you will never let us go. Some days, God, I am lousy soil even with my best intentions. But you keep planting, and sometimes it takes root, gets the water and sun it needs and I grow.

You are cheering for us all, dear God. Rooting for us to find ever more wisdom and hope. Open our ears so we might hear your voice. In Jesus' name. Amen. 🌿

**The Rev. Catherine Malotky**, an ELCA pastor, serves at Luther Seminary as a philanthropy adviser. She has served as a parish pastor, editor, teacher, and retreat leader.





# READING IN WINTER

Christ the King Library Book Club will begin its sixth season in January 2013. Members of the club attend Lutheran Church of Christ the King, Moorhead, Minn. The group meets January through May to read and discuss books. Favorites include *Cry, the Belóved Country*, *Sarah's Key*, *Four Things That Matter Most*, *Still Alice*, *The Book Thief*, and *The*

*Help*. This group meets in the day ("and has been very well attended, also by interested gentlemen occasionally"); however, a second group started up in the evening. "We have really enjoyed these meetings," says Laurie Radde, who submitted the photo. "...lots of laughter, some serious sharing, and of course differing opinions too."

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